

Chapter 11

Can the difficulties of carrying out the paternal function for a toddler be identified from the earliest months of a baby's life?

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Introduction: what is the paternal function?

It is not easy to speak about the paternal function in clinical work with babies. For Lacan, the key aspect of the role of the real father, the mother's partner, consists in separating, at a certain moment, the mother from her child and the child from his mother, in order to introduce the child into the register of symbolic exchange, and thus allow him to himself become a father one day. In this text, I will focus on the male child, because, one, the two clinical examples I discuss concern boys and, two, the question of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, in which the father plays a crucial role, is simpler.

However, this role is not the same as that performed by a dad for a newborn, who primarily needs help reducing the internal and external excitations, and who can only start noticing the words and gaze of the helpful Other, Freud's *Nebenmensch* (Freud, 1950 [1895], p. 317), once this tension has been reduced. The founding scene of the baby's narcissism, so aptly represented in the Nativity scene, where everyone congregates around His Majesty the Baby, can only take place if the baby does not suffer. The baby's well-being is the primordial task of the mother and the dad helps her as best as he can. Yet this assistance does not constitute the paternal function properly speaking. In the Nativity scene, Joseph's often puzzled expression conveys his confusion and perplexity. Sharing in the maternal care, as it is often the case today, does not make one more of a father. A good dad, yes – but not a father. Still, the question of the possibility of there later being a real father for the child is implicitly present from the very beginning.

Already for Freud, the question of '*What is a father?*' remained enigmatic. In today's society, where the struggle for gender equality has often led to a confusion between the roles of the father and the mother, the question becomes even more obscure.

It is interesting to listen to two young parents speaking about this question while their baby is sleeping. However, to understand the relevance of their conversation as well as the pertinence (or lack thereof) of the analyst's interventions, we must first look at the clinical case of a slightly older child, a two-

year-old. Patrick teaches us a valuable lesson about the importance of the function of the real father, a lesson I consider to be even richer than the one transmitted by Little Hans to Freud and Lacan. It was Patrick who showed me that Lacan's commentary on the case of Little Hans remains just as relevant today.

Part I: Patrick, or the dangers of a father's refusal to play his role

Patrick is two years old when his mother gets in touch with our team at the Centre Alfred Binet in Paris. She asks for an appointment because, as she says, her son has been 'violent towards his parents'.

When I meet them, the mother relays the complaints received from the nursery: 'Patrick fights not just with other children, hitting and biting them, but also with the adults, whom he kicks, which the nursery absolutely cannot tolerate. This is an emergency.'

I make a place for him at a little table and offer him different toys. From the outset, Patrick shows a striking imaginative capacity, even though the game he plays will long remain utterly repetitive.

While his mother is speaking to me about him, about his birth and the first months of his life, Patrick creates a puzzling scenario. I should say that I only realised how crucial this scenario was thanks to his determination in showing me its different versions.

Among the boxes of toys, Patrick chooses a family of animals and four pieces of fence. A daddy horse, a mummy horse and a baby horse. He names them accordingly. A fight breaks out between Daddy-horse and Baby-horse, in which the baby, despite its smaller size, seems to win and kicks the dad out of the house. Daddy-horse falls on the ground and the little one stays alone with his mother.

A few minutes later, Patrick goes through another box, looking for the giant monster he has previously seen there. 'Monster' is his own word. For this role, he chooses a prehistoric animal that is much bigger than the other animals in the box. We also have a lion and a tiger of the same size as the adult horse, but Patrick instead chooses this giant 'monster'.

On its arrival, the monster starts breaking the walls of the house, represented by the fence, which falls to the floor. It then attacks the mother, who does not defend herself: it is true that she's much smaller than the monster. Then the baby is annihilated and falls off the table, as if falling into the void.

Patrick soon reproduces the scenario with different characters. The same scene takes place, this time with the cow family and the bull. Patrick is very attentive to the genitals as they are represented in these figures. It is indeed the bull, with his male attributes, whom he names 'Daddy', while the cow occupies the place of the mother. Like in the horse family, he chooses a little calf to play the baby. He creates a new house with the pieces of fence, where he places the three characters. Soon the calf starts attacking the father, who is

much bigger – the animals are appropriately differentiated in size – and again wins the battle. The father is expelled from the house and falls into the hole.

Seeing my surprise, the mother confirms that her husband refuses to exert any kind of authority over their son, blaming the little time he has with him, which he prefers to spend playing with him. She complains that she alone has to bear the dimension of severity required to discipline her son.

Next in the game there is a moment of tranquillity between the calf and the mother cow, which is soon disturbed by the arrival of the monster. While the family characters change, the monster is always the same large prehistoric animal, huge compared to the rest of the characters. The monster arrives, destroys the house, attacks the mother who still cannot defend herself – she is indeed a lot smaller – and crushes the baby, who finds himself in the hole. In the two weekly sessions before the summer holidays, I will see this scenario played out numerous times.

Before looking at the rest of the treatment, let us try and see what this scene can teach us. It seems reasonable to argue that what we see is the little boy's entrance into the Oedipus complex, where the inaugural scene shows us the rivalry between father and son, the latter trying to eliminate his rival in order to preserve the exclusive enjoyment of the mother. Patrick does not deny the difference in size between the father and the son, but he indicates that the father is very weak, and his tiny son can easily eliminate him. The desire of this two-year-old follows the logic of Freud's argument about little Hans, which he pronounces during their first meeting: 'Long before he was in the world . . . I had known that a little Hans would come who would be so fond of his mother that he would be bound to feel afraid of his father because of it' (Freud, 1909b, p. 41). Freud makes this interpretation after he has listened to Hans talking about the horse and making him associate on the similarity between the horse and his father.

Let's not forget that Hans' father is rather startled by this, because he is extremely gentle with his son and does all he can for Hans not to feel any hostility towards him. He cannot comprehend how the child could possibly be afraid of him. Patrick's mother describes a father who resembles that of Freud's little patient. In both cases, there seems to be a failure of the paternal function.

Patrick has not yet formed a phobia and we cannot know whether he will do so at a later time. At the moment, he is less than half of Hans' age and the latter did not previously show any aggressive or violent behaviour towards adults. It is true that their backgrounds are very different. Hans had an entire court around him, constantly at his disposal, while Patrick has to deal with the harsh collective life of the nursery. However, Patrick is also fond of his giant destructive animal. He does not seem scared of it; rather he seems waiting for it to appear, as if it played a crucial role – but what role? Following Freud's direction, we could notice that its arrival puts an end to the mother-child relationship, albeit in a radical way: by destroying everything.

In his essay 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', Freud argues, regarding Hans' fear of horses, that the phobic animal is always a paternal substitute (Freud, 1926a, p. 103). In the same year, in 'The Question of Lay Analysis', he again states this clearly: the animal is 'a disguise of the father' (Freud, 1926b, p. 210). Yet in his case, the child does experience anxiety.

The question of anxiety and its absence is discussed in *Totem and Taboo*, specifically in the chapter entitled 'The Return of Totemism in Childhood' (Freud, 1913, p. 99). Freud mentions the clinical account by Dr Wulff, of a child who loved the dogs that could bite him so much that he would openly declared his love to them (p. 127). Freud is himself somewhat puzzled by this absence of anxiety, but he maintains that these observations justify us 'in substituting the father for the totem animal' (p. 130). The absence of anxiety, as well as the love for the biting animal, would suggest that faced with the danger of maternal engulfment, for which it is a metaphoric substitution, the monster is a very fortunate discovery. This line of argument remains quite Freudian.

In his paper on 'Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis' (Lacan, 2005), Lacan's argument is based on criminological data; he says that he is struck by the force commanding certain delinquents, who act as if they were *fulfilling an order*. Could this possibility help us understand Patrick's aggressive behaviour at the nursery? If so, we might be concerned that Patrick's future harbours something else than a phobia. We will of course never know, because the analytic encounter has changed the course of events.

Continuation of the clinical material

The family returns after the summer holidays, in September. With extreme rigour, Patrick again repeats the two previously described scenarios.

In November, I finally meet the father, who brings his son while the mother is away. The father says he feels overwhelmed by the son's aggressiveness at the nursery, but he does not complain of his behaviour at home. He even says that he loves playing with Patrick and lets him win whenever they play at a battle. He thinks that pretending to lose to his little son in order to make him feel really strong is great fun. And so, whenever they physically play-fight, he lets him win. He tells me about all this with great amusement. He repeats what his wife has already told me: that he is often away for work and wants to take advantage of his time with Patrick, wants to enjoy it rather than spend it disciplining him: 'I'd like him to think of me as his friend, rather than his father.' I try to explain to the father that his position makes his son an orphan of his father, and thus exposed to anxiety. I can see that the father has no idea what I am talking about – it is Patrick who helps make things clearer, who, so to say, lays the cards on the table.

During this long discussion with the father, Patrick goes to look for his toys and recreates his habitual scenario on the little table.

While Patrick's father is watching, puzzled, the baby animal again wins over its father and is left alone with the mother; soon the monster arrives and destroys everything, killing both mother and baby. During the first enactment, I feel that the father still cannot quite believe what he is looking at, namely the havoc wreaked on a child by the absence of a strong father worthy of his name.

However, the repetition of the same scene with different animals, right in front of the father's nose, makes him think that the giant beast might perhaps represent the external dangers threatening his son. Slowly, he comes to admit that the child might indeed feel in danger, alone and helpless against the other children at the nursery who, no doubt, are not always very nice to him. The father has more difficulty admitting that the monster could also be an emanation of the son's fantasy life.

During this time, Patrick continues replaying the scene with a family of elephants. Despite the daddy's large size, the little elephant easily beats him. The arrival of the monster, still the same, ends in total destruction. As I comment on the scene and especially the baby's terrible annihilation by the monster, the father suddenly remembers the nightmares disturbing his son's sleep.

As I have done with the mother, I again praise the son's dramatic abilities and the psychoanalytic precision of his representations. I have to say that throughout my career as an analyst, which spans over forty years, I had never before encountered such a rigorous staging, by a child, of the question of the failure of the paternal function. In order to lighten the mood, I ask the father if he might not have actually read some psychoanalytic texts to his son.

Relaxing slightly, the father says no, but that he can see what it is his son is trying to show. He mentions a 1980s film, *Airplane!* (in French aptly renamed *Is There a Pilot on Board?*). In the story, the terrified passengers realise that the plane they are travelling on might not actually be under anyone's control.

Two weeks later, I ask both parents to come see me. The mother complains of the fact that the father refuses to discipline their son, leaving this unpleasant role to her. The father says he has thought about the scene his son showed him, but he finds the idea of disciplining him repulsive.

I hear myself say:

I am simply asking you to give the little ship's boy the feeling that there is a captain on board and that if he obeys him, all dangers will be avoided. I am not asking you to play the sergeant and scream at him.

The father grows pale and says:

Madame, my father is an army sergeant. I've spent my childhood in military barracks because of his relocations. I've always hated the fact that he would only scream at home. I swore to myself that when I have a child, I will do the exact opposite: I will be my son's friend.

The three of us took some time to absorb what has just been revealed. We then spoke about the repetitive scenarios staged by the boy many times before the mother and father, using different animals. I again speak about the son's accurate representation of the weak father and the unavoidable catastrophe that follows. I tell them it is completely in line with psychoanalytic theory and we joke that, like Obelix, baby Patrick must have fallen into a psychoanalytic cauldron, in order to be so knowledgeable at such an early age.

Patrick's case is a wonderful example of what Lacan tried to articulate regarding the little boy's Oedipal complex. He writes:

He is, as the Freudian dialectic describes him, a little criminal. It is via this imaginary crime that he enters the order of the law. But he cannot enter it unless he has had, at least for a moment, a real partner facing him.
(Lacan, 1998a, pp. 209–10)

Lacan's argument concerns little Hans, but Patrick is an even better example.

The father says that he has never thought that by playing the role of a friend, he would leave his son feeling helpless against the dangers of life. He speaks about his hostility aimed at, if not his own father, then the latter's child-rearing methods. In order not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, he says he will try to radically change his position. Using the monster scenario, I talk to them about a child's inner psychic life, its currents and terrifying monsters.

To my great surprise, as soon as the father changes his position and assumes his role as a real father, Patrick makes swift progress. Already before the Christmas holidays, the scenario has changed: the family is still there, but now the daddy brings the boy to school every morning. The little elephant – because this is now the animal family Patrick prefers – happily follows his father, the big elephant.

Patrick is now three years old and the school no longer has any complaints. The parents have a lot of fun with him. The father holds his place as a real father; the mother seems very relieved. I never see the scene with the destroying monster again. In the stories he now stages, the father plays rather a protective role. As if the father's reversal allowed the little boy to rally under his banner – a kind of resolution, albeit a rather early one, of the Oedipus complex. The symptoms the parents complained about have disappeared. We decide to end the treatment, which lasted for fourteen sessions.

Theoretical considerations

How do we account for this rather spectacular improvement, as soon as the real father enters the scene? In order to do so, we must first look at the child's symptoms in the light of their disappearance.

We see that the monster prevented the little boy from taking the kind of megalomaniac position we see in our work with psychotic children, where the child wins at everything, regardless of common sense.

Here, should we wish to use Freudian terms, castration is not possible. The monster destroys everything – there is no negotiation. What then could be its function?

The monster prevents the boy from fantasising about the danger of the mother reincorporating her own product – himself. The devouring figure is not the mother, who is instead pictured as just as fragile as himself and who is destroyed together with the house.

The scene thus spares the maternal imago and the tender bond with the mother, by projecting all her dangerous and devouring aspects onto the figure of the monster, external to the family. Let's not forget that before coming here and finding an extremely attentive audience in the person of the analyst, Patrick was violent with his mother and the – mostly female – staff at the nursery. The father saw his son's aggressiveness against himself as a game, in which he enjoyed letting the boy win.

With regards to the monster, I also thought about the more intrapsychic dimension of the subject, the locus of the sadistic dimension of his drives, even though in this case the archaic superego remained unconnected to symbolic castration. I was very surprised at the quasi-immediate subjective transformation of not just the child's behaviour towards others, but also of the scene staged by him.

The reason why the child gave up so easily on the aspects of the scene that seemed to properly engage the drives, such as the aggressive behaviour towards others, both big and small, was because the benefit of this renunciation was bigger than the fear of annihilation provoked by the non-mediated fantasmatic maternal figure. We can only recognise this as the pacifying dimension of the Oedipal resolution for a non-psychotic boy. As we have seen, it required the intervention of a real father, certainly loving, but now also taking his position as the ship's captain – to the ship's boy's greatest relief.

Indeed, what is a real father? The function comprises several registers. As Lacan argued, for the child not to feel at risk of being engulfed by the mother, the function of the father must be recognised, so that he can deprive her of her child, while showing her his love (Lacan, 2017, p. 153). This privation constitutes the first denting in the maternal 'other'. When this first register of the paternal function is inactive, the monster can help 'imaginarise' the necessary dent in the primordial maternal 'other'.

It seems that in this first stage, things worked out for Patrick: the place of the third existed, even though his father did not embody it. The mother in a sense indicated to her son that there was indeed a phallus beyond himself. However, the psyche of little boys needs to find a figure to embody the father in reality: this is the real father. His role is to deprive the baby of his mother and vice versa – all the better if he also has a place in the mother's bed. In this case, the little subject can submit to the father, who is now considered as ideal.

Part II: The complexity of the paternal function in the work with infants

In our everyday work with children who begin to show behavioural problems at around two or three years of age, I am most often faced with mothers who wish to rule the family home. It seems that in many of these cases, the psyche of little boys does not react very well to such arrangement. As if their unconscious was not 'politically correct'. When the law is not held by a third agent, it is not experienced by the child as a law, but as abuse coming from a tyrant with whom they are locked in a combat. They will then rebel against any form of law imposed in their social environment: at home, at the nursery or maternity school.

In these cases, we nearly always see the same scenario: a father who cannot perform his role as a father. With one difference: in many of the cases, the mothers do not see why the law of the mother could not be just as effective in raising a little boy. This seems consistent with today's social discourse on gender equality. There is a relatively widespread confusion between 'gender equality' and 'equality of the mother and the father'.¹ The fact that little Patrick reacted to the treatment so quickly was because his mother did not stand in the way of the paternal function. It was her husband who had rejected this function, due to his refusal to identify with his father.

After a futile conflict, the father often lets the mother do as she pleases, giving up on his own role. In the transference work with mothers, I have most often been able to help them give up on their role as the boss, as the enunciator of the law, even if it is only for a few days, and let the father do his job instead. Because their little boy then usually makes spectacular symptomatic progress, they often come back to ask me to help them maintain this rather theatrical position of letting the father be 'in charge'. However, in all of these cases, the work with the mother turned out to be essential, which was not the case for Patrick's mother.

Against the background of this clinical experience, it is interesting to listen to the dialogue of the parents of a five-month-old baby, which again brought up many of the same issues articulated by the parents I have described. It suggests that the fathers' later difficulties in taking up their role are rooted in a much earlier period, when the child is still a small baby.

This dialogue was recorded as part of a treatment of a baby considered at 'high risk of autism', whose three-year-old brother had previously been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder according to the DSM-5 criteria. The older brother had been treated not only by a psychoanalyst but by a multidisciplinary team and the treatment had proven beneficial; the parents have a very positive transference to me, as I was the person to have referred them to the relevant specialists. When Ulysse, the younger brother, was born, I promised the parents that I would assess the baby; in the case of a risk, we would start treatment immediately. And in fact, baby Ulysse initially presented as very withdrawn.

What follows is a transcription of a session at a time when the baby is already doing much better: it is an interesting session, because it highlights the question of the paternal function.

As part of our research on babies considered at high risk of autism and with the parents' consent, these sessions are filmed. I should explain that the following dialogue is not at all related to the risk of autism.

These are very fine parents, very alert, and the mother, who trusts me, speaks openly about her feelings. Her words reflect the values of our society, in which the 'decline of the *nom du père*' has made room for fantasies of 'omniscience' quite common among mothers.

During this session, Ulysse is asleep: this has not happened before. I thus decide to have a chat with the parents. I tell them that the baby's osteopath, to whom I had sent them, rightly scolded me for not referring the baby to her earlier than at four-and-a-half months. She thought this was a serious problem, because the baby, who had been born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, should have come earlier. Already in the first session, when he was one-and-a-half months old, I saw that the baby was in great physical discomfort; I know that the babies considered at 'high risk of autism' nearly always show problems of bodily organisation. I had trusted the movement therapist² to whom I had initially sent the baby, but she did not take the umbilical cord into consideration. We had both been wrong, I tell the parents.

The reason why I mention this staging of the psychoanalyst's 'mistake' is that it had certainly allowed the following discussion to unfold. The fact that the analyst presented herself as having made a mistake made it possible for the mother to then question herself as well. Here is the scene as it was recorded:

1. We are all admiring the beautiful sleeping baby.
2. Laznik to the father: 'He's such a darling, I wonder how you can leave for work and stop looking at him.'
3. Father: 'It's true, it's really hard.'
4. Mother: 'We're the mummy hen and daddy chicken.'
5. Laznik: 'Daddy-rooster, excuse me! A chicken is the hen's child! That's not on!'
6. The father bursts out laughing.
7. Laznik: 'Let's put the baby back into his bed, because it's Daddy-rooster! It means a lot, to be the head of the hen house!'
8. In fact, since his birth, Ulysse has been sleeping in the parents' bed, pressed against his mother, and my various interventions in this matter have had zero effect. When he would be put back in his cot, he would stay asleep for about forty minutes maximum, and so every night it would continue.
9. Mother: 'I sometimes feel like it's me, the head of the hen house.'
10. Laznik: 'Well then, there's something to work on, because it has to be the father who has to *cock-a-doodle-doo* at home. He will have to, he's got two sons.'

11. Mother: 'I don't know, but it's me who takes the books from Alexandre [the son aged three] when it's bedtime, it's me who says "no" all the time. [Turning to the father:] You never say "no"!'
12. Laznik: 'Perhaps it doesn't bother him that Alexandre's reading a bit late in the evening.'
13. Mother: 'If you leave him the book it can go on until really late. So, I think, as his mum, that he will be tired.'
14. Laznik: 'You don't ask Daddy what he thinks, before you intervene? What does Mr Daddy think?'
15. The father, previously very quiet, says: 'Is that a question?'
16. Laznik: 'Yes.'
17. Father: 'I think we should leave him be, because he'll fall asleep naturally. I used to like reading in my bedroom in the evening and my parents didn't know anything.'
18. Laznik: 'That must have been later, no?'
19. Mother: 'At some point, should a parent decide what's good for their child? Yes!'
20. Laznik comments: 'Mum doesn't leave much space here; the answer comes before Dad's been able to give his opinion.'
21. The father says he is worried about what we are going to think of his answer, but he agrees to go for it anyway.
22. Father: 'I am for nearly absolute freedom.'
23. Mother: 'No! Absolute freedom destroys freedom!'
24. Father, slightly angry: 'But I did not say that!'
25. Mother: 'You did, it comes down to the same thing!'
26. The father gives up: 'OK.'
27. Mother: 'My father was just like you.'
28. Laznik, trying to lighten the situation: 'And now we know why Mum chose Dad!'
29. Both parents laugh, and the atmosphere becomes slightly more relaxed.
30. Laznik (speaking to both parents): 'This is taking us away from our immediate concerns, but these are interesting questions. Between the toxic situation of your little boy being so tired for a while and the fact that it's Mummy who makes the law at home, it's clear: the first is a less serious problem than the second.'
31. Mother: 'I have no problem saying no to my son, because I am more and more able to trust my own judgment.'
32. Laznik: 'Mummy and her "judgment"! You'll need to learn to let go. We mothers have all had the same thought: We know what's best. Myself, I hold on to my chair and say: "Perhaps I'm right, but it will be the way father says!"'
33. Laznik mimes the scene in which she is holding onto her chair and the mother starts laughing.
34. The father looks amused: 'The more I'm getting to know you, Mrs Laznik, the more I like you!' He laughs.

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35. Laznik: 'In order for little boys to grow up, you must overcome this absolute conviction that we, the good mothers, all share: that we know what is best for our child.'
36. The mother laughs. The fact that the psychoanalyst includes herself in the difficulty that mothers have in giving up their omnipotence eliminates the superegoic charge of her words. It allows the mother to identify with the analyst. We also have to keep in mind that this mother has been deeply wounded by the illness of her eldest son and learning how to trust her intuition again has been a very important step for her.
37. Laznik: 'We mothers must learn how to bite our tongues.'
38. All this conversation happens in a warm and relaxed atmosphere, which is what makes it possible.
39. The mother then speaks about the adventure on a Venice gondola: 'But I have a husband who banged his head against a bridge in Venice, because he was not paying attention.' Laznik points out to her that in the coming years she might also bang her head against something, yet this does not disqualify her as a parent.
40. Laznik: 'You know, with super-protective mothers, who think that the father is a chicken in their hen house, you know where that leads? It leads to behaviour problems in little boys, at the maternity school. So, we have to learn that even though we think we are right, we have to let the father do things his way.'
41. The father laughs. His wife says to him, in an amused tone: 'Do you realise this is going to kill me?'
42. Laznik: 'But the results are extraordinary, especially for the little boys.'
43. The mother then asks me if the father might not do something that would put the child's safety at risk.
44. Laznik: 'You know how much I respect you, enough to think that the man you have chosen to be the father of your children is neither stupid nor crazy.'
45. Mother: 'It's paradoxical, sometimes I have a tendency to think he is. He himself tells me: "But do you think I'm stupid?"'
46. Laznik: 'You don't have enough confidence in yourself, because I am sure you have chosen a very good man.'
47. Mother: 'The worst thing is that I am convinced of it.'
48. Laznik: 'If you don't provoke him, his children will not get ill. He loves his children.'
49. Mother: 'Of course he loves them. I tell everyone that he's a wonderful father.'
50. Laznik: 'With such a wonderful father, one can feel a bit crushed. For us mothers who know-it-all, it's difficult!' Everyone laughs.
51. Mother: 'So what are we going to do?' I tell Daddy: 'It might be a good idea to ask your son to put the books away?'
52. In the following dialogue about Alexandre's bedtime routine, neither of the parents is really listening to the other.

53. Laznik: 'At the moment it's just a struggle between the two of you and that does not help Alexandre. His bedtime is caught up in the fight between Mummy and Daddy.'
54. Mother: 'Yes, it's a struggle, that's for sure.'
55. I suggest to the mother that she lets the father put his son to bed by himself, while she does something she enjoys – read, watch a film – and trust the father to do his job.
56. Laznik: 'It would be a pity if we managed to save these wonderful children [from the risk of autism] and then at school they had problems with their behaviour – which has nothing to do with autism! – and try to defy their authority figures, because at home it's Mummy who makes the law.'
57. Laznik: 'Do you know what it's called, this game where we let the father win? It's called femininity. It's a game of "he who loses, wins". When we let them win, as fathers, they are all the more loving and attentive towards us.'
58. Mother: 'I understand that, but it's very difficult.'
59. Laznik: 'If you permit me, I will use a few psychoanalytic terms, I don't use to say a lot. [The mother nods.] The mother who "knows it all" is called the "phallic" mother. Not only is she the mother – she has given birth to and nursed the baby – but also – she knows! We mothers can feel, we know, and therefore everyone must submit to our knowledge. And first of all, the father, of course, because he does not know. It's very trivial, we're all like that. Then, it's up to us to try and do things differently. But when we are phallic like that, we lose our femininity.'
60. Mother: 'I lay down my arms. I say – ok, that's the intelligent thing to do.'
61. Laznik: 'But in this game of "he who loses, wins", we are the winners! We win our femininity and their love.'
62. I speak with them about the danger for little boys whose mothers embody the law and who, when they start school, try to defy all kinds of other authorities – teachers, principals . . . When the mother can give the father his rightful place, biting her tongues if need be, it seems to work almost like magic. In the days that follow, the problems at school disappear.
63. Father to the mother: 'I'm soaking up Mrs Laznik's words.' The mother laughs.
64. I repeat what I had told Patrick's father, some years previously: 'On a boat, there is only one captain and his deputy; this way, the little ones can grow up as little ship's boys.'
65. We carried them in our womb; if we also want to be the law, the situation turns into a duel, because there is no triangulation, I tell the mother.
66. Mother: 'Ok, so I bake the cakes, change the nappies and wait for the father's authority?'
67. Laznik: 'You can also make yourself pretty, as you know how to do.'

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68. Mother: 'And if I have an idea that the child needs a prohibition at a particular moment. Do I need to hand it over to the father?'
69. Laznik says to the mother that this is the way the Queen, Snow White's stepmother, commands her servant to go and kill.
70. Mother: 'That's not a very rewarding role.'
71. Laznik explains that a child cannot submit to an authority unless he has first seen an adult doing so.
72. Laznik: 'A mother can say that this is not her opinion, but that we will do what the father has said.'
73. Mother: 'So the mother's role is never to set prohibitions other than those of the father?'
74. Laznik: 'In a lesbian couple, it is the woman who has not carried the child who is in the role of the third.'
75. Mother, speaking to the father: 'Do you realise what a responsibility you have?'
76. The mother wonders if this is why her own parents split up, because her mother always knew better than the father what was good for her children and the father had had enough of it. She says that compared to her own father, her husband is rather docile. He lets her do what she wants. Laznik points out that it is difficult for a father to oppose the phallic maternal power of the mother who knows.
77. Father: 'All the more so, because in our situation my wife's maternal instinct was kind of broken because of our son Alexandre's illness. I'm sure that when my wife says: "he's docile, he lets me do what I want, etc." it's also that I try not to hurt her, because she has already been so hurt by our older son's autism.'
78. Laznik: 'That's a very fine observation. Some specialists say that children who overcome the risk of autism become psychotic. That's not at all necessarily the case. It's simply that sometimes the parents are so paralyzed by the pain they have experienced that instead of doing things as they would have done had the baby not been ill, they are afraid of hurting their partner.'
79. Both parents acquiesce: 'That's it.'
80. Laznik: 'It's very interesting what we're talking about together. When we give fathers their rightful place as fathers, they are very happy with us'.
81. At this moment the baby, who has been sleeping during most of the session, decides to wake up. We explain to him, in simple terms, what the parents have been speaking about.

The baby is no longer completely withdrawn, but still shows difficulties in engaging in the playful exchanges with his mother. The mother in fact has a tendency to rush in communicating with this very sensitive baby and the baby cannot tolerate this. This kind of problem only exists among babies who have an innate excess of emotional empathy and thus find themselves at risk of autism (Laznik, 2014).

Ten days later, the mother and baby finally manage to play together, a game that engages the entire oral drive. The baby offers his little finger to the mother, who finds it delicious; the baby is watching her enraptured and again offers her his little finger. This is a turning point. Everyone is very touched, because we know that for precisely those babies who later become autistic, playing this entire game of the drive is impossible (Laznik, 2009).³ After the session, as I leave to warm up the baby's bottle, the person filming the session asks the mother what may have caused such a tremendous change. It is true that on that day, the mother approaches the baby much more slowly, responding appropriately to the signs he is giving her. The mother thinks for a while.

MOTHER: 'Even the session of questioning our parental role, the place of the father and the mother, it had something to do with it. What [the analyst] asked me to do with my son⁴ is something that I do not do as a woman. It is all connected, from the boo-boo to the sleepless nights, it is all connected.'

Two sessions later, the mother begins to cry. I offer her an individual session that same evening. It turns out that on her way to the session the father told she was just a 'façade'. She thinks this is true. The mother's style has always been slightly hypomanic, which also helped her deal with the fact of having one son on the autistic spectrum and another one who was not yet out of the danger zone. In the following weeks, an entire family history emerges, painful and stretching across generations, a history she was carrying unbeknownst to herself. This gives the mother much more confidence in herself, a confidence that will in turn help her make a bit more room for the father.

Shortly after, Ulysse becomes able to sleep in his own bed. The parents attribute this change to the fact of him not being in quite so much pain anymore, thanks to the work with the osteopath. That is no doubt true. However, the 'questioning' session, as the mother calls it, has perhaps also played a role. The father is finally able to let his voice be heard and is grateful to his wife for letting him make decisions. He organises a surprise weekend for both of them in a luxury spa. It is a success.

As the mother says, it is all connected.

Let me repeat that the children's risk of autism had nothing to do with the mother's difficulty in letting the father play his role; however, it would have been a pity if these boys were later to present with antisocial behaviour.

It so happened that this session brought together several distinct threads. The difficulty of making a place for the paternal function is a phenomenon common to both our clinic and to today's society at large. It has nothing to do with autism, but it can lead to disordered behaviour among children, who subsequently tend to defy social norms. The transgenerational work which the mother was able to carry out in her own sessions, after the father's remark, only made her stronger and gave her a clearer sense of her own history. The same kind of work is also undertaken by all those who, like ourselves, wish to

work as psychotherapists. It is rare for a mother to decide to do so, but in this case she did and was the better for it. She will only be a better co-therapist to her baby, considered at a high risk because of his autistic older brother.

What this dialogue between baby Ulysse's parents teaches us is that the difficulty that many fathers in our society have in assuming the paternal function for has its roots in the earliest months of the baby's life. Its symptoms can be seen more quickly in boys, because a number of them have problems accepting the social order as soon as they start maternity school.

However, if this difficulty for fathers to carry out their function for their young children is a more general one, what happens to those children who do not present any such symptoms at school? Some Lacanian authors have tried to ask this question in societal terms. Charles Melman (2005) has argued that the 'decline of the *nom du père*' is responsible for the rise in a certain kind of nationalism, leading to a xenophobia against those who are not part of the same nation. A form of 'fatherland' would thus be compensating for the shortcomings of the paternal function. After all, 'fatherland' has to do with the father. A sad solution indeed.

Notes

- 1 This text has been translated from French, in which the word *égalité*, here rendered as 'equality', can be interpreted as both parity ('gender equality') and sameness (i.e., a lack of differentiation between the two parental functions). The author's remark warns against this potential confusion.
- 2 These specialists carry out André Bullinger's sensory-motor assessments, which are essential for the work of a psychoanalyst trying to resuscitate a baby at risk of autism.
- 3 This hypothesis has been studied on more than 4000 babies. The PREAUT grid has been published in *PLOS ONE* in December 2017. See Olliac et al. (2017).
- 4 I would often ask her to be more attuned to the signs of this very fragile baby.